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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000870

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: BURNING TIRES IN BATTICALOA: MORE PROBLEMS IN VOLATILE EAST

REF: COLOMBO 0487

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

11. (SBU) Summary: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) called a one-day strike that closed businesses and halted transportation in many areas of the north and east May 10. The strike was called ostensibly to protest the fatal shooting of a civilian protester at a Batticaloa checkpoint the previous day. In separate incidents elsewhere in the district May 9, suspected Tigers fired at a Sri Lanka Army post, injuring one soldier, and were accused of murdering a Sinhalese fisherman. Sri Lanka Army Spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake sees the flurry of events as part of an LTTE campaign to provoke the security forces to overreact. End summary.

12. (U) One person was killed on May 9 after police and Sri Lanka Army (SLA) soldiers fired on rock-throwing demonstrators in Sandivel in the eastern district of Batticaloa. Three policemen and five soldiers were also injured in the melee, according to SLA Spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake. The demonstration, which had been orchestrated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), drew between 400-500 participants, including four Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs, to protest against a newly established security checkpoint.

13. (U) To protest the civilian's killing, the Tigers called a one-day strike, or "hartal," in predominantly Tamil areas under their control or influence in the north and east on May 10. Embassy staff (who happened to be in Batticaloa at the time) reported nearly complete observance of the strike in Batticaloa town, with shops and businesses closed and burning-tire barricades set up on roads to prevent vehicular traffic. (The checkpoint in question had been removed by the morning of May 11, according to Embassy staff in the area.) Similar shutdowns were reported in Tamil areas throughout the north and east, with the exception of Mannar, on May 10. (In Mannar a hartal was observed on May 11.) According to Brigadier Ratnayake, the hartal in Jaffna was accompanied by scattered violence, as suspected LTTE militants burned an SLA bunker in one location, threw a petrol bomb at another, and rallied demonstrators to throw stones at a third. The crowd dispersed after police fired tear gas. Muslim areas in the east generally did not observe the hartal, according to police and local politicians. Mohamed Faizl, a Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) MP from the eastern district of Ampara, reported that while shops were open in 100 percent Muslim areas in the district, Muslim constituents living in mixed Tamil/Muslim areas generally observed the strike out of fear of retaliation by militants.

14. (SBU) In addition to the demonstration in Sandivel, violent incidents were reported in other locations in Batticaloa on May 9. According to Brigadier Ratnayake, suspected LTTE cadres threw a hand grenade and fired gunshots at an SLA bunker at Mavadvembu, injuring one soldier. After the SLA returned fire, the area was cordoned off with police assistance, Ratnayake said, and three suspects arrested. In Kalkuda--one of the few areas in Batticaloa with some Sinhalese residents--a Sinhalese fisherman was abducted from his home and killed by suspected LTTE militants. A website run by the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) claimed the victim as a party supporter and alleged an LTTE campaign against "JVP activists and sympathizers in the East." JVP headquarters in Colombo described the victim as a "supporter"; Army and police sources, however, told us on May 11 that they were unable to verify a motive in the fisherman's killing.

15. (SBU) When asked to explain the recent unrest in Batticaloa, the SLA's Ratnayake said that the "LTTE wants to create problems with law enforcement" to erode the newly improved relations the security forces have been able to build with the local population in the wake of the tsunami. LTTE strategy is to provoke an incident that will discredit the security forces and diminish growing public confidence in their abilities, he opined. (Note: This is a common refrain with the SLA, used often with Army briefers and spokesmen.) 16. (C) Comment: This is the second time in two months that a Tamil civilian--in both cases, an elderly man--has been killed after security forces fired on unruly demonstrators

(Reftel). Although the LTTE undoubtedly instigates the confrontations, the security forces' overreaction, unfortunately, only gives the Tigers more ammunition. The Army has exhibited far greater restraint in the face of far greater provocation in the past; firing on unarmed civilians will do little to help the improved civil/military relations Ratnayake claims are emerging. Murder and mayhem have become part of the local landscape in Batticaloa, but the violence generally occurs between the LTTE and the rival Karuna faction, which is based in Batticaloa, or other anti-LTTE Tamil groups. Direct attacks on the security forces are far less common. The recent incident could indicate growing Tiger resentment of the Government's role in tsunami aid distribution and/or its alleged support to the Karuna faction. It is too early to determine the veracity of the JVP's claim that the LTTE is targeting its supporters. Pressing that claim, however, regardless of its validity, suits the JVP's political agenda just fine for now, and we expect the JVP will use the killing as yet another reason to oppose the joint mechanism on tsunami aid.

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